

The new age of Bookmobiles

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Bookmobiles have had a long history in the United States. Libraries buildings in the 19th century grew first in large urban cities and towns. As transportation at that time was slow and very localized, libraries were largely inaccessible to farmers as well as those living in the mountains, woods, bayous and plains of early America. Bookmobiles were the first method of reaching those who couldn't physically come to the library.

The first bookmobile on record went into use in Washington County, Maryland in 1905. This was a horse drawn carriage with space for 2,000 titles. In the 1910s automobiles largely replaced horse drawn bookmobiles, although because many of the rural locations bookmobiles visited lacked paved roads, 4-legged bookmobiles remained common. In the 1930's Franklin D. Roosevelt created a Pack Horse Library program as part of his New Deal legislation to promote literacy in the hills of eastern Kentucky. And bookmobiles themselves helped expand the notion that people everywhere should have access to library services, which at that time meant books, so people everywhere could learn to read. Throughout the mid-20th century bookmobiles continued to serve rural communities and began serving urban communities in neighborhoods without libraries of their own. Bookmobile use peaked in the 1960s and went into decline until the Covid-19 epidemic in 2020. Libraries once again turned their energies full force on taking services to the people, since "the people" couldn't come to them. The "value of outreach" had once again become essential.

Today, bookmobiles in Umatilla County are being used to deliver books to elderly or disable patrons not able to leave their homes. In Pendleton the current bookmobile is being used to take books for checkout, story times, and other programming to local parks, pre-schools and community sites in and around Pendleton. The Pendleton library acquired a trailer for use in this manner during Covid and has used it so well they have a second bookmobile on order, set to arrive in August! This new bookmobile will be easier to drive to more locations (not required to be pulled and parked by a truck), as well as having wheelchair access. Jennifer Johnson, the Pendleton Library Director, is very excited to take this new bookmobile to parks that were previously



inaccessible to the trailer and is planning to expand their outreach trips not only to pre-schools around town, but to assisted living facilities and nursing homes as well. The new bookmobile will allow many more patrons access to the library's collections, particularly those who cannot get to the library building.



Renderings of Pendleton Public Library's new bookmobile.

Around Umatilla County there are several other libraries using transportation to bring books to patrons. Umatilla Public Library has a bookmobile that delivers books to those who need it, and the Athena Public Library has a book bike that can make deliveries. These libraries, along with many others across Oregon and the nation, are embracing the simplest solution to getting books (and programs) into the hands of the people; bringing the library to them. After all these years it is still an effective method to deliver library services! Keep an eye out for the new Pendleton Bookmobile and find out more about these libraries at www.ucslid.org.